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PP RUEHAG RUEHROV
DE RUEHDM #0615/01 1691438
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 181438Z JUN 07
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3723
INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0473
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000615

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PARIS FOR WALLER; LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/17/2017

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN YOUTH GROUP SENTENCED TO LENGTHY PRISON
TERMS

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, for reasons 1.4 b/d.

¶1. (SBU) Summary. The Supreme State Security Court June 17 sentenced seven young civil society activists, including five university students, who tried from 2005 to 2006 to organize a youth discussion forum, to prison terms ranging from five to seven years. In stark contrast to other, more well-known prisoners of conscience, six of the students were held virtually incommunicado for well over a year between their arrest and the verdict. Post has included draft language for a possible statement on the verdicts. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On June 17, the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) sentenced seven young civil society activists, including five university students, to prison terms ranging from five to seven years for developing a youth discussion forum and posting articles on the online component of that forum. Included among the seven was Omar Abdullah, student activist and son of civil society advocate and former political detainee Ali Abdullah. Five of the accused received sentences of five years and two received sentences of seven years. An eighth, Ali Nizar Ali, who was part of the youth discussion forum and arrested on January 26, 2006, was released as part of the Presidential amnesty to mark the Eid al-Adha holiday on December 28, 2006. It is unclear why two members of the groups received longer sentences when all of the accused were found guilty of the same charge of, "spreading false news about the nation;" however, Muhannad al-Hassani, Lawyer and head of the Syrian Human Rights Organization speculated that the longer sentences for Maher Isber Ibrahim and Tareq al-Ghorani stem from their alleged connections to Fared al-Ghadry of the Syrian Reform Party.

¶3. (SBU) BACKGROUND: Syrian Air Force Intelligence (SAFI) arrested the seven activists between January and March of ¶2006. All seven were held incommunicado by Air Force Intelligence in the Harasta suburb of Damascus until November 26 when they were brought before the SSSC and transferred to Sednaya prison, which traditionally has housed political prisoners. All of the group accused SAFI of torture during the November 26 court session, according to their attorneys. Moreover, the six who have been continuously imprisoned since early 2006 have been prevented from meeting their lawyers except on November 26 and briefly on April 15, 2007. The November 26 court appearance was also the only time that most of the group were allowed to see their families since their arrest until the June 17 verdict.

¶4. (SBU) Omar Abdullah and the other six prisoners appeared to be in good spirits during the sentencing. After the presiding judge rendered the verdict, family members and

lawyers were allowed to talk with and pass money to the convicted men through the bars on the door to the holding cell in the SSSC building. In addition to the poloff, diplomats from France, Germany, Norway and the European Commission were in attendance.

15. (C) Comment. The sentence for Omar Abdullah and his co-defendants was similar to that handed out to more high profile and established dissidents who faced the same charge of "spreading false news about the nation" such as human rights lawyer and civil society activist Anwar al-Bunni. Yet, there was a striking difference between the way each was treated in the run up to their respective verdicts. The SARG allowed older, more well-known political prisoners like Bunni to have visits with their families and lawyers nearly every week, while Abdullah and the others in his group were held virtually incommunicado for over a year before they were found guilty. One possible explanation is that the youth were less well known to the international community and media giving the regime a freer rein to mete out harsh treatment.

16. (U) Suggested Language for a possible statement on the verdicts follows: The United States condemns the government of Syria for its harsh and unjust sentences of seven young civil society activists, most of them university students, including Omar Abdullah, who were found guilty of nothing other than forming a discussion group and posting their writings on a website. These sentences reflect the Syrian regime's contempt for human rights and freedom of expression, in addition to the Syrian legal system's corruption and lack of independence. In addition, the United States condemns the manner in which each of the seven were treated following their arrest. All were held incommunicado for months on end

DAMASCUS 00000615 002 OF 002

and denied access to their lawyers and families. We call upon the Syrian Government to immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience and observe international standards for all Syrian citizens who are detained.

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